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ABSTRACT

Ten years of intensive research and development in foreign language teaching in Finland have resulted in a foreign language curriculum with a communicative orientation and textbooks to accompany it. Another outcome of this work was a realization of the complexity of language teaching, which led to models of the language teaching process. One such model illustrates the complex interdependence of the curriculum, available teaching materials, teacher training, expectations of various interest groups, testing, and the organization of the school system. If all of these elements have a similar orientation, the conditions for change are optimal. (MSE)

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CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

That language teaching throughout the world has undergone several abrupt pendulum swings is a common observation. In the process, dichotomies are often introduced to conceptualize a very complex phenomenon:behaviorist/cognitive, discrete-point/integrative, formal/informal, learning/acquisition.

Thus, language teaching may appear to undergo quite a number of changes without necessarily making any significant advance. What look like promising new ideas often lead to disappointment. Many are in fact not new at all; they are simply revised versions of old approaches, marking yet another change in the direction of the pendulum.

Why should this be so? The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once observed that the art of progress is the ability to maintain order amidst change and the possibility of change amidst order. Progress is possible therefore only if we know how to manage the factors that contribute to it. In the case of language teaching, our inability to demonstrate clear theoretical and practical progress would seem to lie with the inadequacy of our theoretical conceptualization of language teaching in relation to both language education and to education in general.

If this premise is valid, one implication is immediately obvious. In order to make meaningful progress we need to have a better understanding of education, teaching, and learning; we need a comprehensive model of these basic concepts.

This chapter briefly outlines one such model. It is based on my experience with foreign-language curriculum construction and evaluation in Finland, where we have spent the last decade redesigning our programs to give them a communicative orientation. Due to the importance of foreign-language instruction in Finland--all students study at least two languages, and language studies comprise some 20-45 percent of available class hours--this reform was not a responsibility to be taken lightly.

THE NEED FOR MODELS IN EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

There are several reasons why we need models in education and in language teaching. Education and language teaching as systems and processes are so complex that we need models:

1. to help us understand and explain how they function;
2. to guide and inform our thinking, planning and actions without determining them in detail;
3. to help us evaluate their performance and make required changes; and
4. to help us foresee future problems and developments.

In Finland we have in recent years been particularly interested in macro-level models. This has been a natural consequence of extensive reforms at all

educational levels from preschool to higher education. The need for national planning was recognized when the Ministry of Education in late 1976 set up a committee to draft a plan for a national language teaching policy (submitted to the Ministry in February 1979). While models are obviously needed in planning and administration as well as in research, teachers also should be familiar with them if they do not wish to relinquish a legitimate interest in how the language teaching system operates and how it should and could be improved.

A major development in education in general, and in language teaching as a specific instance, seems to be a growing awareness of education as a social institution, as a social system, serving fundamental social desires, needs and functions. Thus, language teaching serves basic communication needs, and as its importance grows it increasingly acquires the characteristics of any institutionalized process. This means, among other things, that language teaching is becoming (1) more organized, roles and role relationships are specified in more detail; (2) more systematized, tasks are specified; and (3) more stabilized, language teaching is not dependent on particular individuals.

Language teaching is therefore not only the activity of individual teachers. It is a system of many activities. In order to understand it as a system we must realize its boundaries, its central purposes and its level in a larger context. We must be aware of its various subsystems and their interrelationships. For all this we need models to describe and work out the practical consequences of different approaches (see Takala 1983).

The preceding discussion implies that education in general, and language teaching as one aspect of education, is an "artificial" science (Calfee 1981). "Artificial" refers to the fact that education, schools, curricula, etc., are the products of the human mind (artifacts), not natural phenomena (natural objects). Another way to express the same idea, without the possibility unfortunate connotations of the term "artificial," is to characterize education as one instance of the "sciences of design" (Simon 1981). The sciences of design deal with the interaction between the inner and outer environments, in other words, how goals and intentions can be attained by adapting the inner environment (human mind) to the external environment. One of the major consequences of this view of education is that educational phenomena have to be seen in context if our aim is to make improvements in current practices. Decontextualized reforms are bound to fail or to result in only limited success.

A GENERAL MODEL OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A SYSTEM

Having made the claim that educational phenomena are subject to human judgment, we should try to see what implications this view has for language teaching. What kind of model could we have of language teaching as a complex system of a great number of different activities? One possible model is presented in Figure 1 (Takala 1980). It is an adaptation of similar models proposed by Stern (1974) and Strevens (1977).

Formal language teaching in a school-type context takes place in a complex setting consisting of a number of levels. At Level 1, the societal level, the need of languages is manifested in a more or less clearly defined language teaching policy and is recognized in the form of societal support for language

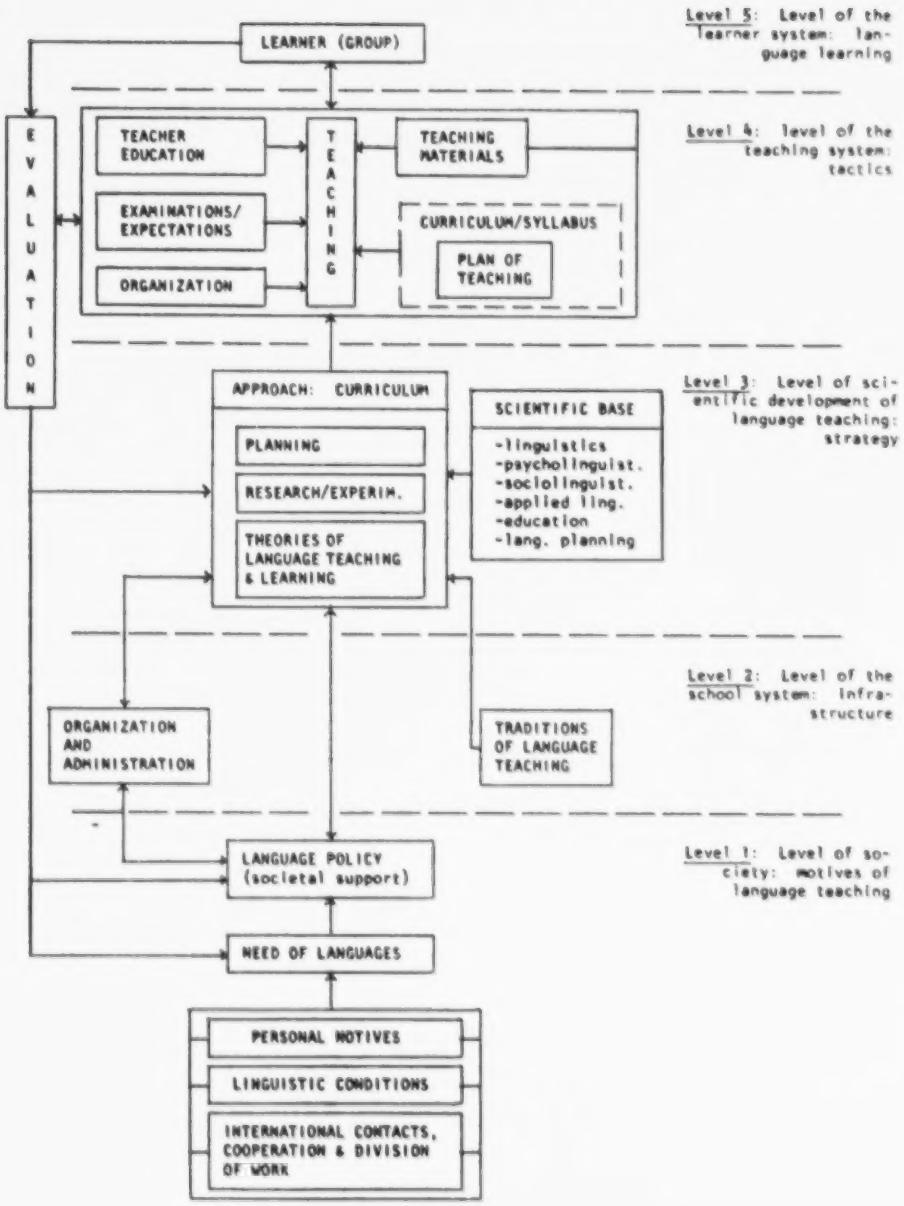

Figure 1. General model of the language teaching system (Takala 1980).

teaching. At Level 2, the school-system level, we are concerned with the foundations of language teaching, its infrastructure: the organizational and administrative framework and the traditions of language teaching. At Level 3 we are concerned with the definition of the general approach or strategy of language teaching. This is usually expressed in a curriculum (syllabus). Syllabus construction is a demanding task in which a number of disciplines can and should be drawn upon. The written curriculum (the *intended* curriculum) is carried out to a smaller or greater extent (the *implemented* curriculum) at the level of teaching (Level 4). This teaching takes place in a complex setting, where many tactical decisions must be made by the teacher everday. However, the curriculum is ultimately realized by the pupils (the *realized* curriculum).

Evaluation data are mainly collected from the teaching and learning levels to get feedback to other levels as well. All parties involved in education (teachers and their students, principals, superintendents, school boards, state educational authorities, and national or federal educational agencies) are interested in getting data on student performance as the ultimate criterion of how teaching works. The motives and uses of data vary but there is no substitute for actual student performance data.

The model presented in Figure 1, which is based on the Finnish situation, shows that the curriculum plays an important part in teaching. Some modifications may have to be made to it to suit other contexts, but it is likely that on the whole the model is applicable to most countries where there is systematic teaching of foreign languages in the school system.

FACTORS AFFECTING CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Curricula (syllabuses) are among the most important factors that guide the construction of teaching materials, tests, and teaching itself. As the importance of knowing what guides teachers' activities has increased along with a growing awareness of teachers' crucial role in carrying out the educational objectives, there has emerged a special line of study called curriculum research. After more than ten years of work on various aspects of the curriculum, I have come to the conclusion that HOW the curriculum should be constructed depends on a number of factors. This is illustrated in Figure 2 (Takala 1980:59):

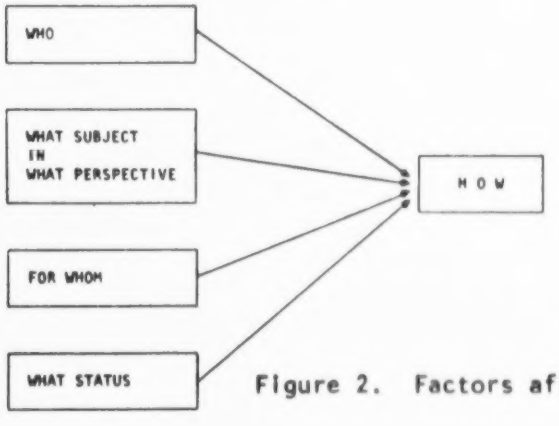

Figure 2. Factors affecting the form of the curriculum.

Who constructs the curriculum? Is it all done centrally so that teachers only work *with* the curriculum? Or will curriculum construction be a hierarchical process, that is, will there be contributions at all levels, from the federal/national level to the individual level? Are the teachers expected to work *on* the curriculum, interpreting it to suit local circumstances, as well as work *with* the curriculum?

The subject matter also has a definite impact as such. We do not expect a mathematics curriculum to very closely resemble a foreign-language curriculum. But even within the same subject there are a number of possible varieties depending on how the subject, in this case language, is viewed. What is our *perspective*, our view of language? As Halliday (1974) points out, a comprehensive view of language requires that we recognize it as a system (linguistic focus), as behavior (sociolinguistic focus), as knowledge (psycholinguistic focus), and as a form of art (literary focus). Differences in how the language profession sees each of these aspects, for example, a predominantly formalistic or functionalist view of language, has brought about changes in curricula and will do so also in the future (see Berns, this volume).

Because it is very important in all human communication to take into account the communication partner(s), it is necessary in syllabus construction to remind ourselves of our possible target groups. *For whom is the curriculum intended?* There are several possible target groups: political decision-makers, general public, employers, writers of teaching materials, teacher educators, examining boards, teachers and students. There are also many different kinds of students with different needs and expectations. For different target groups we need different versions with varying degrees of specificity. We cannot expect to be able to communicate properly with such diverse groups unless we tailor our message to suit each group.

The way in which we should construct the foreign-language syllabus also depends on the *status* it is to have. Will it be binding in terms of what should be taught or even what should be learned, or is the curriculum only a guideline, a road map, to help teaching proceed in a desired direction? It makes quite a difference if a detailed curriculum is a binding document or only one possible exemplification of the general objectives of teaching. In the latter case the curriculum would be a kind of yardstick or point of reference for teachers and textbook writers.

Thus we can conclude that there is not, and *can never be*, a definitive curriculum or any one best curriculum for all times and for all circumstances. As there are no universally valid tests, there are no universally valid curricula. Both texts and curricula are valid only under specific circumstances and for specific purposes. Here again the contextual dependence of educational phenomena is once again demonstrated.

A NEW COMMUNICATIVE FL SYLLABUS FOR THE FINNISH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

Syllabus construction is a very important task in a country like Finland where all schools have to follow the national syllabus and where textbook publishers have to make their textbooks congruent with the syllabuses if they wish to have

them approved for school use. The syllabuses are also used as a basis for teacher training, tests and examinations. Thus syllabuses are potentially very powerful instruments for guiding what goes on in schools. It is thus imperative that they be based on the best expertise available.

The decade of the 1970's was a hectic period of syllabus construction in Finland, since all levels of the national school system were reformed during that period. More than twenty syllabuses were constructed for foreign/second language teaching (English, Swedish, Finnish, German, French and Russian). It was during this period that syllabus construction became a more institutionalized process with representatives from the teaching profession, staff inspectors from the National Boards of Education and researchers participating in the process. I was heavily involved in this work as a research consultant and frequently as a secretary of various national work parties. (For further discussion of some aspects of this work see Takala 1983.)

A new communicative FL syllabus prototype was constructed in 1975-76, revised in 1979-1980, and approved in 1981. This prototype, which included English and Swedish, subsequently served as a model for syllabus work in several other languages.

One practical problem in communicative curriculum construction is that such curricula tend to become very long and unwieldy, and the initial version of one Finnish syllabus was no exception. For this reason, it was considered necessary to provide an overview of the objectives. After several attempts, it turned out that a procedure called "facet analysis" (Guttman 1970; Millman 1974) provided a useful method for such a concise statement of objectives.

Facets are central dimensions of a phenonemon, something like the factors in factor analysis. In the new Finnish FL syllabus, the facets are (a) language functions, (b) language skills, and (c) topics and notions. The following excerpts from the new syllabus for teaching foreign language in the Finnish comprehensive school illustrates this system. This overview, which is followed by detailed accounts of each facet, has been favorably received by teachers. It is cognitively manageable. It also appears that the systematic juxtaposition of the facets helps in seeing the links between them.

CONCLUSION

Systematic work on how new ideas in foreign language teaching might be approached in Finland began towards the end of the 1960's. Several versions of FL curricula were developed and tried out at different levels of the school system (Takala 1980, 1983). New revised versions were offically approved some ten years later. This ten-year lag is not due to lack of effort. On the contrary, a massive effort was required to develop the first drafts to inform teachers about them through pre-session and in-service education, collect feedback from teachers, textbook writers, university departments, etc., and to incorporate this feedback in the revision. Now, after ten years of work, new textbooks also exist which are in line with the communicative syllabuses. In retrospect, I am convinced that it requires about ten years of systematic hard work to introduce any new idea in education. In some cases, that may even be an optimistic estimate.

(1) LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS	(2) LANGUAGE SKILLS	(3) TOPICS AND NOTIONS
The aim is that the student can understand, respond to and produce language in oral and written discourse for the following purposes: *SOCIAL INTERACTION* • addressing persons • greeting, taking leave • presenting oneself • thanking • apologizing • complimenting • making an offer • making an invitation • conversational gambits *DIRECTING ACTIVITY* • ordering, exhorting • forbidding • warning • requesting • advising • suggesting • persuading *EXPRESSING OPINIONS, ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS* • like/dislike • agreement/disagreement • pleasure/displeasure • approval/disapproval • surprise • sympathy • wish/persuasion • intent/purpose • certainty/uncertainty • necessity *IMPARTING AND SEEKING INFORMATION* • labeling, categorizing • asking and answering • stating something • correcting statements • describing and reporting	The following communication skills are practiced: *ORAL COMMUNICATION* *Listening Comprehension:* the student can • understand short expressions (by appropriate responding) • understand simple conversations • understand complete discourses spoken at almost normal tempo and based entirely on familiar language structures and vocabulary • understand complete discourses that may contain also some unfamiliar structures and vocabulary which can easily be inferred from the context *Speaking:* the student can • produce expressions needed to take part in simple conversations • produce short complete discourses *WRITTEN COMMUNICATION* *Reading Comprehension:* the student can • understand written expressions and respond to them • understand short texts with familiar structures and vocabulary • understand the gist in new short text containing familiar structures and vocabulary • understand the gist in texts which may contain also some unfamiliar structures and vocabulary, which can easily be inferred from the context *Writing:* the student can • write short messages in accordance with a model or instructions • write short answers to written or oral questions • write short messages independently • write descriptions, reports and stories according to prompts and independently	The following topics and notions are dealt with: *PEOPLE AND THEIR IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENTS:* • self • family, relatives, friends • other people • home, everyday tasks and chores • food and eating • clothes and accessories • parts of the body, health, illness, hygiene • perceptions and feelings • thinking *ACTIVITIES* • being and possessing • doing things • moving about • school and study • world of work and occupations • leisure time and hobbies/interests • shopping, running errands • traffic and traveling • mass media *NATURE, COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES* • nature and weather • country and town • Finland and the Finns • English-speaking countries and peoples • other countries and peoples *QUANTITY AND QUALITY* • number and quality • age • money and price • attributes: color, size, shape, quality *TIME* • point of time and contemporaneousness • present time • the past • the future • frequency • duration *PLACE AND MANNER* • location and direction • method, means, instrument *RELATIONS* • qualitative relations (comparisons) • temporal, spatial and referential relations (time: now-then; place: here-there; reference to persons and things: pronouns) • order and dates • quantitative relations • cause, effect, condition • combination, discrimination • definiteness: indefinite/definite

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One outcome of this intensive work in curriculum construction was a growing realization of the complexity of language teaching, which led to work on models of the system of language teaching. One of the merits of comprehensive models like the one presented in Figure 1 is that it shows the complex interdependence of various aspects of educational phenomena. Thus, in language teaching, we should not overestimate the role of curricula in guiding teaching. As Level 4 in the Figure shows, teaching is influenced not only by the curriculum but by the available teaching materials, by the training that teachers have received, by the expectations of various interest groups, by tests and examinations, and by the organization of the school system. The conditions for change are optimal if all these have a similar orientation.

It follows that due consideration should be given to all contributing parties and all should be consulted and encouraged to help in implementing new ideas. Of crucial importance is tests and examinations. Since they are used to get feedback for a variety of purposes, as mentioned earlier, they are probably the single most important factor in education. Thus, it is an advisable strategy to devote early and considerable attention to tests and examinations when a new approach is launched. In fact, it is likely that new approaches are most efficiently introduced if tests and examinations embody their central ideas. Such partly test-driven educational improvement also has the practical advantage that it requires less time and effort to produce good tests than to produce good curricula and textbooks. Educators should not underestimate the positive contributions of evaluation, as they should not underestimate the possible negative washback effect of evaluation which is not congruent with teaching objectives and the teaching itself.

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